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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS CATHOLICS IN THAI NGUYEN AND LANG SON

REF: A) HANOI 1113; B) HANOI 715

HANOI 00001877 001.2 OF 003

11. (SBU) Summary: On a July 5-7 provincial outreach trip, the Ambassador discussed issues related to the Catholic Church with the leaders of Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang and Lang Son provinces (Protestant issues, especially in Bac Giang and Lang Son, reported septel). In Thai Nguyen, the Ambassador also visited a Catholic parish that successfully ministers to 28,000 parishioners in spite of lingering difficulties in their effort to recover some former properties. In Lang Son, the Ambassador visited the province's impressive new Cathedral for its 6,000 Catholics, a strong indication of the level of cooperation between provincial officials and the church. Both Thai Nguyen and Lang Son Catholic officials noted that the church has not yet been allowed to undertake much charitable or educational work in their respective parishes. We can expect that Lang Son will continue to facilitate expansion of the church in their jurisdiction. Thai Nguyen Parish is worse off, but the church is also growing in this province, and relations with local officials remain amicable, if less productive. Both provinces demonstrate that Catholics in most of the north are able to worship freely, or at least with minimal constraints. Lang Son, in particular, is a model that we will raise with less enlightened provinces which do not permit the Church to more easily minister to Catholics. End Summary.

THAI NGUYEN PARISH CHURCH

12. (SBU) On July 5, the Ambassador visited Father Joseph Nguyen Van Khiem, priest-in-charge of Thai Nguyen Parish. A large proportion of the parish church's congregation turned out to welcome the Ambassador with flowers and songs. The church itself is relatively small compared to the newer three-story administrative facility built behind the edifice. Khiem explained that he is responsible for over 28,000 Catholics in his portion of Bac Ninh Diocese, and administers a total of fifty sub-parishes. All of the parish's churches, chapels and administrative buildings were built in the last twenty years as almost all of the original church properties (as well as most of the province's pagodas) were destroyed during the anti-French resistance. Recovery of these properties has been especially difficult because most Catholics in Thai Nguyen are immigrants from other, mostly lowland, provinces of Vietnam and the Church has difficulty asserting title to properties on the basis of past congregants.

13. (SBU) Many of the original properties are also now "encumbered by residents." With the Provincial People Committee's (PPC) help, parish officials have recovered some properties, but there are still problems to be resolved. For example, the Thai Nguyen Parish Church (which can only hold half its parishioners at one time) has reclaimed only a portion of the original land area of its property. The Church was built in between two low-rise residential blocks

which effectively prevent any increase in the footprint of the building. In 1996, 200 Catholics demonstrated in front of the newly built church to reclaim the remaining land under the residences, but local officials broke up the protestors and severely beat one man in front of the church. Father Khiem admitted that he has submitted repeated applications to recover the additional land but the issue remains unresolved.

14. (SBU) Khiem said that he was assigned to Thai Nguyen in 1998 as the first new priest for the parish in fifty years. In 2005 the parish received two more priests to minister to several district sub-parishes. A third priest is awaiting local official's permission to be assigned. Three parishioners are currently studying at the Hanoi seminary, and there are five other priests from Thai Nguyen who serve in other parts of Vietnam, Khiem noted. The Ambassador asked if the parish has been allowed to conduct charitable work under the GVN's new framework on religion. Khiem replied that in the north, few churches are allowed to undertake charitable activity, even in the area of health care. For example, the church can only provide spiritual assistance to people living with HIV/AIDS. The parish has some educational programs to provide spiritual and professional assistance to adults, and it has a modest kindergarten program for 80 children.

THAI NGUYEN LEADERSHIP -----

15. (SBU) At lunch following the church visit, the Ambassador discussed religious freedom with Thai Nguyen Provincial People's Committee (PPC) Chairman Nguyen Van Kim. The Ambassador commended the PPC for its work to facilitate Catholic worship in the province, but noted that some property concerns clearly remained. Kim stressed that all religious activities in Thai Nguyen have been facilitated according to official policy and the PPC is broadening the space for religion. He acknowledged that the growth of the church has led to frictions between Catholics and residents, but asserted that the PPC will deal with these problems according to

HANOI 00001877 002.2 OF 003

regulations so that both sides will be satisfied. "We are not only trying to return properties, but we are also allocating new land for churches as well," Kim said. The Ambassador noted that the GVN's new regulations also allow the church to engage in charitable works, especially in the area of health and HIV/AIDS. "I hope that in addition to resolving property disputes, provincial leaders will help facilitate such activities soon," he said. Kim made no direct reply.

LANG SON CATHEDRAL -----

16. On July 7, the Ambassador met with Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet at the city cathedral in Lang Son. Kiet is also Apostolic Administrator and Bishop of Lang Son Diocese, and made a special trip at his own initiative to brief the Ambassador. The Cathedral was inaugurated in 2004 and was built with USD 600,000 donated by the Vatican and by U.S. citizens. The structure resembles a Pagoda and incorporates a variety of Vietnamese ethnic minority traditional design elements including, among other things, a stilt house for Jesus Christ at the altar and extensive stained glass depictions of the saints dressed in traditional ethnic garb. (Note: Lang Son's population is only 15 percent ethnic Vietnamese. End note). Kiet explained that since 1990, Lang Son Diocese has made significant strides. He was appointed Bishop in 1999 at which time there were no priests for Lang Son's 6,000 Catholics (most of whom come from lowland provinces - initially without their families). Today there is a cathedral and Bishop's residence and six new priests have taken up their benefices in the parish. Five parishioners are studying at the seminary in Hanoi and ten nuns are working as church administrators. Some old church properties remain occupied by other Vietnamese citizens, and there are still some areas in the province without churches to serve Catholic residents. However, Kiet is confident that the Lang Son PPC is open to resolving these remaining issues. "In general, religious life in Lang Son has been easy." Kiet noted that the diocese only recently requested the return of the derelict Na Sam Parish church, but "I think our application will

be resolved in a quick and easy manner."

¶7. (SBU) Kiet stated that he will continue as Apostolic Administrator in Lang Son until the Vatican appoints a new bishop. The main reason for the delay is the Vatican's difficulty in identifying a new candidate. The Ambassador noted that with six priests - one for each 1,000 Catholics - Lang Son is better off than Thai Nguyen province which has three priests covering 30,000 parishioners - one for 10,000. He asked if the Church plans to transfer priests between provinces to ease the burdens of clergy in poorly covered parishes. Kiet said that as Thai Nguyen belongs to another diocese there are no plans to transfer priests from Lang Son. The Ambassador noted that neighboring Ha Giang Province currently has no priests assigned (Ref A) and promised to raise the issue with the PPC when he visits Ha Giang in August. Kiet explained that although Ha Giang is technically part of Lang Son Diocese, the Church has not been allowed to assign a priest to minister to Ha Giang's Catholics.

¶8. (SBU) Turning to charitable works, Kiet explained that programs in social work, healthcare and education remain goals for Lang Son Catholics, but the diocese has not had enough clergy to engage in such activities in the past. However, the Church recently joined with local authorities to sponsor an International Committee of the Red Cross program that brought two groups of French dentists working with Dentistes Sans Frontieres to Lang Son to provide free dental exams for residents. In addition, one French doctor was able to provide healthcare for one month in several remote villages. As far as education is concerned, local authorities only permit the Church to provide students with free notebooks, though during summer vacation the church conducted several classes for students (NFI). Nevertheless, Kiet is confident that the Lang Son PPC will allow the church to establish nursery schools in the near future.

LANG SON LEADERSHIP

¶9. (SBU) At lunch with Lang Son PPC Chairman Doan Ba Nhlen, the Ambassador noted that the Lang Son Cathedral is an impressive testament to the spirit of cooperation between local officials and the church clergy. Nhlen said that the Lang Son leadership had worked closely with Bishop Kiet, helping him to build the new structure and to increase the number of Catholics in the province. The Ambassador urged Chairman Nhlen to find a way to resolve quickly the church's application to recover the Na Sam property. There was no further discussion of Catholic issues.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Lang Son Diocese is easily the most advanced Bishopric in the north outside Hanoi. The beautiful, new cathedral is a strong

HANOI 00001877 003.2 OF 003

testament to Kiet's success in convincing provincial authorities to attend to the spiritual needs of the province's Catholics. It also goes far to explain why the Vatican chose this unassuming, soft spoken cleric as Hanoi Archbishop. We can expect that the Lang Son PPC will continue to facilitate expansion of the Church in its jurisdiction. Thai Nguyen Parish is worse off, mainly due to their property concerns and a shortage of priests. Nevertheless, the Church is also growing in that province, and relations with its PPC remain amicable, if less productive. Both provinces demonstrate that Catholics in most of the north are able to worship freely, or at least with minimal constraints. Lang Son, in particular, is a model that we will raise with less enlightened provinces like Ha Giang and Son La (Ref B), which do not permit the Church to easily minister to Catholics.

MARINE